

# ANNETTE LEMIEUX

flipped

**STEVE MILLER:** *In the work of Sally Gall and the Glow Series by Andrea Blanch that is in the same issue of this magazine called Enigma, you don't necessarily have to know their work... the enigma for me in their work is to figure out exactly what you're seeing. Their images are abstract enough to mess with your knowledge of the lens capturing something about which you're not sure of. In your work the image is clear, the enigma is in deciphering the meaning. For example, at your last show at Kent Fine Art there was a work entitled Hellos and Goodbyes, 1994 - a wall of twenty-two hands in separate frames presumably waving. Eleven were positive images, and the other eleven were the negative version of the same image. My question is what are you greeting?*

**ANNETTE LEMIEUX:** First of all, I always think my work is very clear. It's clear to me, apparently maybe not so clear to the viewer, and that always puzzles me...because I think I'm very clear. But, is the point to be clear at all? With *Hellos and Goodbyes* you use the word 'greeting,' someone waving to someone. For me it was that, but it was also grieving in the end...the goodbye. 'Greeting' and 'grieving' I guess. It was a hello and a goodbye to something or someone. There's no enigma there, I thought.

**STEVE:** *Well there is. The enigma is that you do have to decipher it. Because the next question is what were the sources of the hands waving?*

**ANNETTE:** Many sources, from many books actually. My life was informed by the news and picture books, places that I was never physically at. They're from all over the place. They're from Nazi Germany, from U.S cocktail parties, from political rallies, etc., etc.

**STEVE:** *They are displayed generally in an oval. How do you come up with the straight line, vertical, the grouping... how did that happen?*

**ANNETTE:** That was intuitive. You say an oval, I say a cross.

**STEVE:** *See, this is the enigma. You're giving some clarity. This piece preceded Left Right Left Right from 1995 that's currently on view at the Whitney. Is that correct?*

**ANNETTE:** Yes

**STEVE:** *The Whitney exhibition was about portraits. Did you conceive that particular piece Left Right Left Right as a portrait?*

Portrait by Amelia Spinney. All images Courtesy of the Artist and Elizabeth Dee Gallery, NYC.











**ANNETTE:** At that time it was my observation of what was going on during the election in 1996. During the debates, observing the opposites.

**STEVE:** *So it's like the portrait of a moment or a portrait of a time?*

**ANNETTE:** Exactly.

**STEVE:** *What was the communication between you and the Whitney that led you to invert the images for the current display.*

**ANNETTE:** Well, I woke up on November 9th at about 4:30 in the morning and checked out the news. I was horrified that Trump was now my president. My world just went upside down. I thought that my work, *Left Right Left Right*, that was installed in the Whitney's *Human Interest* exhibition didn't make any sense anymore. The piece was a celebration of protest or opposition, but that morning I felt defeated. So I went into school to teach that morning and all my students came in dragging their feet, they were in mourning too. There was not going to be any kind of regular class that day. So I said to them, why don't we all go into the seminar room and wait for Hillary Clinton to concede. So we did. While we were waiting for her to come on, I shared the thought with my students that I had that morning. I showed them *Left Right Left Right* and asked them what did they think of the idea to request that my work be turned upside down? They unanimously said, go for it.

So I emailed the curator, Scott Rothkopf, at the Whitney and asked if he would consider doing this. He got back to me right away, that he had discussed it with the director Adam Weinberg, and Adam said something like - yes, we're the museum for artists. Yes, we can do this. And so the next Tuesday when the museum was closed that's when they flipped the work. When the museum opened on Wednesday my work was upside down.

**STEVE:** *And that was a great idea for a protest, I thought it was a really effective gesture and the first wave of artists making strong statements about the election so I thought it was a beautiful gesture.*

**ANNETTE:** It was really from my gut.

**STEVE:** *You were once described as a minimalist with an ax to grind - your clean presentation and your inscrutable assemblage of a complex reality certainly is relevant to the current situation. You are mixing politics, art history, misogyny, popular culture and the leveling of hierarchies. I know you're not going to spell it out for me but am I close?*

**ANNETTE:** You are close.

**STEVE:** *Duchamp plays a big role in your 2015 exhibition at Kent Fine Art, as well as, Guston.*

**ANNETTE:** Yes, there is one photo work that refers to Guston's painting, *Painting, Smoking, Eating* from 1977. But the exhibition was influenced more with Duchamp and Man Ray's collaborations.

*Fumé*, the other image of me smoking is after Man Ray's portrait of Lee Miller, it's the same exact pose. And the photo work, *Duchamp Erased*, is actually that. I manipulated the four Man Ray portraits of Duchamp by erasing Duchamp's image, leaving only the backcloth that Duchamp was photographed in front of.

**STEVE:** *Each image in that particular show seems like the piece of a larger puzzle. When I first came to New York in the 70s Duchamp was the name of the game. We were talking about conceptual art, a lot of people were.... I think the Pictures Generation has a lot to do with grabbing readymades in a sense.*

**ANNETTE:** Well art has always grabbed at something that came before.

**STEVE:** *With the rise of commercial art fairs, good looking (over conceptual) seems to be the name of the game*

**ANNETTE:** Yeah, big red and shiny. I don't have the production resources other artists have, if I did, who knows what could happen.









Above: Annette Lemeux, *Bad Habits*, 2015; Following spread: *Fumée*, 2015.

**STEVE:** *Regarding issues of production, I did notice that all of your photographic editions are miniscule. You make those pieces kind of unique and special, they're like one over three with an A/P. In your case, I see the small editions as a sign of personal integrity to your work. Do you want to comment on that?*

**ANNETTE:** Hmm, if I do a benefit photograph for an institution there can be an edition of 25-50, because it's benefiting them. Maybe I'm not thinking of benefiting myself, but maybe I should.

**STEVE:** *Early in your career you had an association with the Pictures Generation.*

**ANNETTE:** Well you start somewhere and then you branch off on your own. I was actually roped in with the Neo-Geo group because I was making *some* paintings that were geometric. I am thinking now of Ashley Bickerton - what he's making now compared to what he was making then. You just can't stay somewhere for no reason. I mean if you stay in that place where you're put, then you're not making any work, you're just making stuff.

**STEVE:** *I think it's interesting that you say Ashley, cause I interviewed Ashley and I think of you and Ashley as very similar, you're sort of like, you're loners. You're out there doing your own thing and it's much more to do with what you need to do internally.*

**ANNETTE:** Yeah, Ashley doing it in boring Bali and I in exotic Brookline, MA.

**STEVE:** *The title of your 2015 exhibition at Kent Fine Art was called Everybody wants to be a catchy tune - for me that was an interesting title, the show was more like a display of solitude than about being the popular kid in high school.*

**ANNETTE:** Yes, that title either comes from Duchamp, himself or Robert Pincus-Witten.

**STEVE:** *When I saw the work Companion Piece, from that same exhibition of an image of a sled with a real sled my mind went to the name of Kane's sled uttered in the movie Citizen Kane . . . "Rosebud." It also reminds me so much of the Guston image, you smoking alone. It's the solitude . . . it's the being alone and it's comparing the reality with the image...presence and absence.*

**ANNETTE:** Exactly, and that sled is mine, with a photograph of its unattainable partner.







**STEVE:** *With Calendar Girls from 1987, what were your criteria for making these selections?*

**ANNETTE:** Well there are twelve images so it's sort of like a calendar. It actually was inspired by one of my favorite songs called "Time" on a Tom Waits' album called *Rain Dogs*.

For me these Hollywood pin up girls weren't so happy...they're women in bad situations, every month, every day.

**STEVE:** *Mon Amour from 1987 seems like your most overtly political piece. I assume the source on the left is what I think is a horrific scene from the WWII, correct?*

**ANNETTE:** It was Hiroshima. What was horrible was on the right side there are bathing beauties having a splendid time on what looks like a stairs that reflects the stairs in the image from Hiroshima. Both situations could have happened on the same day. So, it's two different realities happening at the same time.

I think all this comes from a very early place...meaning early observations. I come from the very lower middle class, just above the worst situation. I would walk to school and would pay attention to the neighborhood bum, which was very upsetting to me.

**STEVE:** *How old were you?*







**ANNETTE:** I could've been six or so. I saw prejudice when I was in kindergarten. I knew what I witnessed and what I was taught was wrong. I came from a place where persons had few experiences outside of small towns or outside of the country. I just knew that there was something wrong with the place, with this type of mentality... So that fuels the work and the news fueled the work and current observations fuel the work...it's not a pretty land.

**STEVE:** *Is the current political situation affecting the work you're making now?*

**ANNETTE:** Oh yeah, it's killing me. I'm working on an exhibition for the MFA Boston and in the beginning the work was inspired by scenes or objects in films like *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Fritz Lang's *M*, among others...so I'm working on this show that's due in the fall and now Trump and this political climate has swayed the work in another direction. And I can't ignore what the work needs now, I can't stay with the purity of just working with my original ideas that came from these films...I never felt this so strongly before, how much our present landscape is changing the work. I don't want it to change my work but it is.... or the concept. So it's pretty challenging and I think it's really hard to make work, but making work is somehow an optimistic act. As negative as the content can be, it's also an optimistic act.

**STEVE:** *One of my all time favorite pieces from you is The Great Outdoors, 1989, with an Adirondack chair and Adirondack table with a lamp in front of the picture that is from an old postcard. It makes me love the nostalgia of the postcard image but also the loss of the primary experience in nature and being replaced by a substitute. Photography is some form of a visual stand-in for a past action and the Picture Generation movement was about filling up the empty vessels among the multitude of images and giving them new meaning. Are you still collecting images for your work right now and what kind?*

**ANNETTE:** I'm collecting images from the movies I'm watching or the films I'm interested in for my up coming show. I'm thinking more words and symbols after this election. It's like in some way I have no words to say, maybe the words I say are documents...more documents of something said and less of me saying something. I don't know if that makes any sense.

It's like looking at what symbols are supposed to be but what they are now...possibly. They are once again based on looking at something that is vulnerable as we are very vulnerable right now...